

# Nicholas Adontz'

## *The Legends of Maurice and Constantine V, Emperors of Byzantium*

Translated from French by Robert Bedrosian and published on the Internet, 2025.

This article was written in Brussels in 1932 and first published in 1934-1935. The present translation was made from its republication in the collection of Adontz' articles, *Études Arméno-byzantines* (Lisbon, 1965), [pp. 125-136](#), available at Internet Archive.

[125]

### I. Emperor Maurice [582-602] (1)

The Armenian historian Kirakos of Gandzak has preserved for us a curious story about the accession of Emperor Maurice. He relates:

Some say that the latter [Maurice] was from the village of Oshakan in Armenia; others say that he was from Taron. Because of poverty, he went to Constantinople, where, through a lucky accident, he became king. This is what happened.

When Emperor Tiberius died, the nobles fought with one another, and would not be pacified. There was great warfare among them [since they thought that] the victor would be emperor. Now the patriarch went among them and convinced them to cast lots. Whoever won would have the kingdom and rule over the others. They [agreed to this] with oaths and written pledges. [The agreement was] that at daybreak they would open the great gate of the city,

---

(1) The question of Maurice's origins was treated by P. K. Ter-Sahakian in his work (in Armenian) *Armenian Emperors of Byzantium*, which Merka reported in *Byz. Zeitschr.*, 1910, p. 549. In order to reconcile the Byzantine and Armenian information, Ter-Sahakian adopted the view of Father Alishan that Maurice's father was probably a Roman, and his mother an Armenian [Հայ կայսերն Քիլիկացի իննի [Armenian Emperors of Byzantium], by K. Ter-Sahakean/Sahakian (Venice, 1905), vol. 1, pp. 25-125, [Mo'rik haykazn \[Maurice the Armenian\]](#), at Internet Archive]. See also E. Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches*, [p. 85, n. 14](#).

---

[126] and the man who happened to appear (even if he was very humble) they would take to the royal palace. Then the princes would sit together and whomever he crowned would have the kingdom. All agreed to this, and the agitation ended.

When the appointed hour arrived, they opened the gate of the city and saw Maurice at the door, holding some sort of straw to sell, to satisfy his needs. The army seized him and took him to the bath, where they washed and dressed him in noble attire, and took him to the court. As soon as they told him why he was called, he demanded of them papers and oaths that those who had lost [in the contest for] the crown, not slay him. And they swore vehemently to him that he should remain unconcerned about that.

They all sat there filled with vain hopes, and each said to himself: "It might be me." There was the throne with the crown [suspended] above it, and there were the [imperial red] shoes nearby. Then Maurice came among them and took the crown in his hands, and began to circulate among those seated. As soon as he came to the first

he rejoiced, but the second one was saddened as soon as he walked past him, while his companion rejoiced. Thus did Maurice circulate among them two or three times, delighting then depressing them. Suddenly, Maurice went and sat on the throne and placed the crown on his own head. When everyone saw this they were astonished. But since they had sworn to obey anyone on whose head he placed the crown, they let it be. The patriarch came forward and put the shoes on his feet and prostrated himself, as did all the nobles, and they exclaimed: "Long live Emperor Maurice."

He convened a council of inquiry regarding the Chalcedonian heresy, and summoned the *vardapets* [doctors of the Church] of Armenia. Vrt'anes and Grigor and other *vardapets* went, but in no way did they aid [align with] the Byzantines, and they returned anathematizing them. Armenian *naxarars* [lords], escaping from the rule of the Iranians, came to Maurice seeking refuge. But Maurice, revealing his inhuman disposition, did not give them any largess. Instead, he abolished the stipends which had been established for them by previous kings.

It is said that he sent for his father to come to him and to enjoy his royal glory with him, or, if [he could] not [come], to send him advice by which he would be able to rule the kingdom.

When the messengers went to the father they found him tending his garden and told him the king's command. He replied: **[127]** "I am not fit to be a king's father." And he began to uproot the largest cabbage heads in the garden, tearing the heads and covering them with earth; yet he nursed and cultivated the small ones. When the men saw this they assumed that he was daft and left him. But the men did not understand what he had done. When they went to the emperor, they told him everything and described the foolishness that had transpired in the garden.

As soon as Maurice heard it, he laughed and said nothing; but gathering those nobles he believed were plotting against his rule, he killed them all, so there would be no conspiracies against him, and he put lesser men in their positions. Calling those men he had sent to his father, he said to them: "This is my father's advice, which he gave in the garden and which you did not understand."

Some say that he was from the village of Arabisos (Arp'sus) in Cappadocia, which general Tiberius later made into a city.

Maurice, together with his family and sons, died a miserable death, because of the severity of his ways. His troops, led by Phocas (which translates "fire") fell on him and killed him. Phocas ruled in his stead [602-610] (1).

\*

There is another version of the same story about Maurice, which was published recently, and which we believe it useful to reproduce here in [French] translation.

After this Maurice, the emperor of the Romans, died. He had taken Zak'ran, sister of K'asre, emperor of Persia (to wife). The murder of Maurice took place in the following way. When Maurice reigned in Constantinople he sent someone to his own country, to Armenia, to the city of Ani (to his father). The latter was a gardener. The Roman came and found David (Dawid), Maurice's father. Summoning him, he said: "Your son Maurice summons you, because he has become emperor of the Romans." When David, Maurice's father, heard (this), he laughed and said: "I cannot come. I prefer my small garden to the Roman empire,

---

(1) Kirakos (Cyriac) of Gandzak, *Hist. Arm.*, pp. 27-29 [[Kirakos Gandzakets'i's History of the Armenians](#), in English, at Internet Archive, pp. 41-45. Kirakos is the 13th-century author of an important universal history of the Armenians.]

---

**[128]** for who permits a foreigner to rule?" Bringing bread he placed it before him; then he himself entered his garden and began to pull up the biggest root-vegetables. Taking the small plants he (began to) cast them into the places of the largest. On seeing this the Roman said: "What is that you are doing?" He said: "Such ought to be done." When the man returned and came to the emperor Maurice, he did not bring his father. He related before the emperor what his father had done. Then the emperor understood and said: "This he gave me as advice concerning my magnates." He arrested all the magnates of the Greek empire; some he drowned in the sea, some he exiled. To the most insignificant men he gave the dignity of patrician and general; and he formed an army of common people and officers..." (1).

\*

The legend of Maurice's accession is not historical. The circumstances by which Maurice ascended the throne are well known. Emperor Tiberius, a few days before his death, named him as his successor. Tiberius had no male child, but two daughters, the eldest of whom, Constantina, was given in marriage to Maurice. The new emperor was head of the imperial guard when Justin II sent him to the East to replace General Justinian who was waging war against the Persians. Therefore, Maurice could *not* have passed for a vegetable seller at the time when good fortune offered him the throne. Byzantine authors believed him to be from Arabissus, a city in Armenia Minor, today's Yarpuz. His mother, Ioanna, was the sister of the city's bishop, Adelphius. The bishop of Melitene, Domitianos, was his nephew, son of his brother, Peter. Maurice's father, Paul, was still living at the time of his accession; he had him brought from Arabissus to Constantinople. He had only one brother, Peter, whom he named curopalate, and three sisters, one of whom, Damiana, had a son named Athenogenes, who was bishop of Petra in Arabia. The only real historical event found in the Armenian legend is reduced to this: Maurice had sent for his father. The second version is very mistaken in calling him David instead of Paul. All the same, one might say that this legend

---

(1) Shapuh Bagratides, *Hist.* p. 3-4 (Pseudo-Shapuh) [[Pseudo-Shapuh Bagratuni \[The Anonymous Story-Teller\]](#), p 185, in English, at Internet Archive]. The story of Maurice's assassination follows this introduction in Shapuh's account.

---

**[129]** has preserved another historical memory. The village of Oshakan disputes with Arabissus the honor of being the birthplace of Maurice. But apart from Oshakan, the legend knows a third place which claims the same honor: it is the Taron country. According to an Armenian tradition, Taron was considered the home of Basil I and not of Maurice, who was originally from Oshakan. A confusion has therefore arisen in the legend. What pertained to Basil I has been transferred to Maurice. The poverty of Maurice also seems to be borrowed from the legend of Basil. One wonders if the image of Maurice as the poor man in front of the gate of the capital is not a simple reflection of the figure of Basil in front of the Golden Gate, in the famous legend of St. Diomedes. We would therefore have proof that the Armenians were aware of this legend. But they forgot it, while its debris has "crystallized" around the name of Maurice.

The distortion in the story of Maurice's enthronement is due to the influence of the legend of Basil. Tiberius entrusted power to Maurice in a great assembly, in the presence of senators and lords of the court. The emperor, after making a solemn speech, placed the crown on Maurice's head. This is still evident in the Armenian legend; the assistants hoped, perhaps, each for his own part, to be chosen as successor to the dying emperor, as our legend presents

things. The end of the scene, however, has been altered by "contamination" with what was known about Basil I, who, from a simple peasant had risen to the imperial dignity. It was not Tiberius, according to the legend, who had placed the crown on Maurice's head, but Maurice, who had crowned himself.

Another point which the legend insists upon is the origin of Maurice. Armenian authors persist in repeating that he was a native of Oshakan. The village, known by this name even today, is situated near Ejmiatsin, and contains the tomb of Mashtots', creator of the Armenian alphabet. Moderns have rejected the claim of Oshakan, in favour of Arabissus. Even St. Martin, who was gifted with a special flair for recognising the Armenian elements in Byzantine history, rallied to those who **[130]** pronounced for Arabissus. The authority of Evagrius seemed to him decisive in this dispute (1).

However, the Armenian testimonies contain details that are not to be rejected. They merely must be interpreted. Asoghik (II, 6) attests that Maurice was from Oshakan and full of love for his native village, which gave rise to an adage that could be rendered as follows: "From here to Oshakan—may incense go before!" [or, "From here incense is sent to Oshakan," [Asoghik \(II, 6\)](#) (Antilias, Lebanon, 2010) p. 732, Classical Armenian text at Internet Archive.]

Another adage is mentioned in the second version of the story about Maurice. The text in Shapuh Bagratuni is incomplete, due to a gap of several pages. The editors completed it according to the [medieval] collection known as *Oskeporik* ("Golden Belly") where it is remarked, among other things, that Maurice restored peace in Armenia, so much so that it was commonly said: "It is peaceful, as in the time of Maurice."

This comports with reality. The continuous wars, whose theatre was Armenia, ended under Maurice. In 591, the borders of Byzantine Armenia were extended from Theodosiopolis (Erzerum) to the shores of Lake Sevan in the north, and from Martyropolis (Mufarkin), to the shores of Lake Van in the south. Thus the greater part of the Armenian lands came under the domination of Byzantium. It was probably on this occasion that the city of Shirakashat was named Mauricopolis in honour of Maurice (2). Shirakashat-Mauricopolis was located in the area of Ani; this is why the envoys of Maurice, according to the second version, went to Ani to look for his father, and not to Oshakan. Despite the harmful policy that the Byzantine authorities pursued in ecclesiastical matters—to the great discontent of the Armenians—the Armenians found the domination of a Christian empire more bearable than that of the Persians. The popularity of Maurice among the Armenians can be explained without resorting to the hypothesis of an Armenian origin, but the adage concerning Oshakan remains enigmatic in this case.

It is curious that, according to one testimony, Arabissus shares Oshakan's claim as the object of Maurice's solicitude.

---

(1) Lebeau, X, p. 146, note 3.

(2) Moïse de Khorene, *Géographie*, p. 34 [*The Geography of Ananias of Shirak* (Ashxarhats'oyts') (Wiesbaden, 1992) [p. 65](#), in English at Internet Archive].

---

**[131]** Arabissus was also rebuilt and adorned with magnificent buildings. An earthquake destroyed it in 586. The emperor ordered it to be rebuilt again and made into a more beautiful city than before. Again the city was destroyed in a violent earthquake, and this time it was completely ruined (1).

This story is no less legendary than that of Oshakan. There is certainly a link between the two localities considered to be Maurice's birthplace. Basically, their claims can be reconciled, if we acknowledge that the parents of the emperor really came from Oshakan, and that they had left it to settle in Arabissus. After the reorganization of the Armenian territories made under

Justinian in 536, we observe a strong Armenian migration towards the lands of the Empire. It is possible that it was at this time that Maurice's family emigrated to Arabissus.

However, the formal testimony of Evagrius seems to prevent reconciling the divergent information in this way. He says that Maurice took his origin, as well as his name, from ancient Rome, ἔλκοντα μὲν τὸ γένος καὶ τοῦνομα ἐκ τῆς πρεσβυτέρας Ῥώμης (2).

We do not believe that this testimony is indisputable. Indeed, why would a noble Roman family have had to leave that illustrious city to go and settle in a distant corner of the Empire like Arabissus, which offered no advantage and which, moreover, was exposed to the perpetual danger of the Persians, like a purely military post? Evagrius is the only author who provides us with this information. One may wonder whether the historian does not owe it to his own personal philological conjecture, based on the Roman form of the name *Mauricius*. He emphasizes that the name is Roman, which likely confirms our suspicion. Did not the historian start from the name Maurice to conclude that it was of Roman origin? A great Roman figure, Philippicus, had married one of Maurice's sisters. This fact may have encouraged the historian toward his arbitrary conclusion.

---

(1) *Michael Syrien*, ed. Chabot , II, p. 359. [*The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, [p. 422](#), in English at Internet Archive.]

(2) Evagrius, *Hist. Eccl.*, V, 19 [Evagrius' *Ecclesiastical History*, [Book 5, ch. 19](#)], in English at Internet Archive.]

---

## [132]

Oshakan's claim should not be ignored. The Armenians knew Maurice well. He gained his reputation in Armenia in the campaign against the Persians. The Armenians had supported King Khosroes, Maurice's protégé, against the rebel Bahram Chubin, doubtless on Maurice's orders. The Armenian general, Mushegh, left for Constantinople after Khosroes' triumph to present himself to the emperor. However, Maurice was not a friend of the Armenians, who hated him for his disastrous policy towards the Armenian church and towards the feudal lords of the country. It was he who first conceived the idea of forcibly transporting the Armenian princes to Thrace to use them against the barbarians. He advised his ally, Khosroes, to do the same thing, to force the Armenian princes to go and fight at the extremity of the Persian kingdom against his enemies. All in all, Maurice rather harmed the Armenians. No one in Armenia would have thought of taking pride in him. One cannot therefore suspect in the Armenian legend a feeling of national vanity which would have led to attributing an Armenian origin to him. On the contrary, Maurice's reputation was so bad that national prejudice would have led to ignoring, rather than recognizing, his nationality. If, despite all this, the Armenians insist on his birth in Oshakan, one cannot neglect the value of the Armenian legend, as scholars do.

It cannot be argued against our thesis that Maurice's family does not bear Armenian names. Byzantine Armenians did not generally keep their national names. Those who are known by Armenian names all belong to the feudal aristocracy. This stratum had its own nomenclature. The lower classes, as well as the clergy, usually used Christian names according to the ecclesiastical calendar. Maurice is presented in Armenian legend as the son of a gardener. He was therefore not associated with the nobility. It is nevertheless worth noting that the son of his sister, Damiana, was called Athenogenes, a relatively rare name, which was also that of the grandson of Gregory the Illuminator.

In any case, the origin of Maurice is not so clear [133] as is generally believed, and the Armenian tradition is as good as the testimony of Evagrius. *Mauricius* may well be a



translation of the Armenian name *Sev-ouk* (or *Sev-ik*), derived from *sev*, "black" with the suffix *ouk* (1). [On the origin of Maurice's name, see Adontz' [Supplementary Note](#), at the end.]

## II. Legend of Constantine V [741-775]

[According to Kirakos of Gandzak] "After Emperor Leo, his son Constantine [V, 740-75] ruled. He was known as *Kawalinos* [Copronymus], that is 'gatherer of dung.' For when the Arab army was encamped on the bank of the Halys river, Constantine ordered dung gathered and thrown into the river. When the Arabs saw this they became terrified, thinking that the emperor's army was numberless; and they fled from him. It is related that on one day he killed five lions, one after the other." (2).

On the insulting epithets attached to the name of Constantine V, see the testimonies collected by Alfred Lombard, *Constantin V, empereur des Romains*, p. 12, 13. The epithet κοπρώνυμος which is naturally an insult, presupposes the epithet καβαλλῖνος. This is not necessarily insulting in origin; we suppose that it is a friendly nickname given by his soldiers (who idolized him) to Constantine, who was a great horseman. There is an obvious parallel between Κωνσταντῖνος and Καβαλλῖνος. The initial and the ending of the name were kept and in a spirit of familiar jest Κωνσταντ—was changed to Καβαλλ—in allusion to the equestrian taste, or the horse-riding passion, if you will, of the emperor. But soon his adversaries, the iconophiles, seized on this nickname and compared it to Καβαλλῖνα which means "horse droppings." The taste for horses became for the iconophile pamphleteers, the taste for manure, for filth. Hence Κοπρώνυμος. We do not insist, because all this is known.

---

(1) Lazarus of Pharpe, p. 127 [Ghazar P'arpets'i's *History of the Armenians* [III.70, p. 248](#), in English at Internet Archive]. Father Paul Peeters found it possible that the name Stylianos, which the famous minister of Leo VI bore, reproduces the Armenian name Siuni, understood as derived from the word *Siun* "column" (*Handes Amsoreay* 1926-1927, p. 727).

(2) Kirakos, *Hist.*, p. 40 [[Kirakos Gandzakets'i's History of the Armenians](#), in English, at Internet Archive, p. 64].

---

### [134]

But the Armenian text teaches us that even admitting that καβαλλῖνος had this "excremental" meaning, the supporters of the iconoclastic hero had still managed to explain it in a way that was honourable for the victorious Emperor. The author of this explanation, new to us, was inspired in his invention by ancient reminiscences. This is not surprising; we have just seen in the story of Maurice's father the theme well known to Herodotus and Titus Livius of the silent advice given by the felling of flowers or ears of corn that exceed the others (Periander and Thrasybulus, Tarquin). We have also recognized the anecdote of Diocletian preferring to plant his cabbages rather than take back the empire. Similarly, Constantine giving the illusion of a large cavalry to the enemy by a mass of manure recalls the evaluation of the strength of the Persian cavalry by the abundance of its manure in the *Anabasis* (2). What is perhaps more important is the anecdote about Constantine the lion-killer. This simple detail is enough to justify Mr. H. Gregoire's hypothesis about Constantine V as an epic hero (3). I am able, thanks to a nice find by Mr. Ernst Stein, to complete this indication, which was isolated until now. In the chronicle of the bishops of Naples, written before the end of the 9th century, shortly after 872 (4), we find an important fragment of the legend of Constantine of which the sentence of the Armenian chronicler is only a detached fragment. Here is this precious text which speaks for itself and which Mr. Alfred Lombard, latest biographer of Constantine V, was unaware of:

*Hunc aiunt Constaniinum robustiorem fuisse virum, qui leonem, ferocissimam bestiaux, pugnando occidit, et draconi se opposuit et ipsum interemit. Nam dum quadam aquae ductum sua magnitudine detineret, et multos fetore suo*

---

- (1) Herodotus, V. 92, 6 [Herodotus' *Histories*, [Book 5.92.6](#), bilingual Greek/English at Internet Archive].
  - (2) Xenophon, *Anabasis*, I.6 [[Book I, ch. 6](#), bilingual Greek/English at Internet Archive.]
  - (3) "L'Age héroïque de Byzance," in *Mélanges Jorga*, p. 383 sqq. Paris, 1933. *Revue des Et. gr.* 1933, p. 32.
  - (4) Capasso, Società Napolitana di Storia latina, Monumenti Storici, Série prima cronache, t. I, p. 196, Napoli 1881 (*Chronicon episcoporum Neapolitanae Ecclesiae*).
- 

### [135]

*perimeret, nullumque alium consilium repperiret semet ipsum pro omnibus Constantinus periculo dédit statuens semet ipsum cum dracone conflicturus. Factoque sibi lorica falcata, quam novaculis aculissimis ex omni parte munivit, atque ad locum ubi ille teterrimus draco quiescebat, devenit. Nihil conatus relictos suos, ad eum solus in troiit.....*

[A leaf is missing from the manuscript here]..... *Noluerunt eos recipere, quo audito universi ex diversis provinciis ad eum collecti sunt et una cum ipsis civitas obsessa est, et, ne in tam multitudinem famis adgresseretur, corii solidos pro aureis nomismatis fecit a negociatoribus dari, et recipi promittens eos, dum in palatio introierat omnes colligere et aurei solidos ad corii solidos commutare. Constantes autem obsidentibus urbem, hii, qui intra civitatem erant, veniam impetrantes, cum gloria ab omnibus receptus est. Ingressus Constantinus palatio, promissum quod de solidis fecerat explevit.*

They say that this man, Constantine, was very strong. In solitary combat, he had killed a lion, the most ferocious of beasts, and had fought against a dragon and killed it. For [the dragon] was so large that [the size of its body] covered a certain watercourse and many were killed by its stench. Finding no other plan, Constantine put himself in danger for [the good of] all, deciding to fight the dragon. Having made himself a scythe-shaped breastplate, which he fortified on all sides with the sharpest razors, and having come to the place where that most terrible dragon was resting, he did not even wait [for his other company] but advanced upon it alone...

[A leaf is missing from the manuscript here] They refused to receive them, and when they heard of this [people] from all the different provinces gathered to him, and together with them the city was besieged. And, lest famine should attack such a multitude, he caused the merchants to use *solidi* [made] of leather instead of gold coins, and to accept them in transactions, promising that when he entered the palace he would collect them all and exchange the leather *solidi* for gold ones. But while they were besieging the city, those who were within the city begged pardon, and were received with glory by all. Constantine entered the palace and fulfilled the promise he had made about the *solidi*.

Muratori was quite right in his annotation to the story of the dragon: "Neminem Graecorum novi qui draconis hujus ab impio principe debellati meminerit [I know of no Greek (writer) who recalls this dragon being defeated by an impious prince]." Let us be sure that the "dragons" were less silent on this subject than the chronicles. As for the tale of the leather money, it

perhaps contains an element of truth. On the other hand, it factually concerns the siege of Constantinople by Constantine during the revolt of Artavasdes (in 743). Here, the chroniclers (see the texts in Lombard, p. 28) tell us about a mass of freeloaders driven out of Constantinople by Artavasdes, whom Constantine treated with an intelligent humanity—which trait was one of the principal causes of his enduring popularity. What a pity that the loss of a single leaf has deprived us of other features of this legend of Constantine, guessed at by Lombard and by Mr. Gregoire, but which only the text discovered by Mr. Stein finally reveals to us. Perhaps this deterioration of the Neapolitan codex is not accidental. Perhaps this leaf was torn out of the epic by some orthodox reader indignant at seeing the impious Copronymus spoken of in this way?

## Supplementary Note

P. 133. On the name *Mauricius*. Could *Mauricius* simply be the Armenian *Mowrik*? There was a so-named **[136]** deacon of the patriarch Nerses (died in 371) according to the historian Faustus of Byzantium. In any case, Shapuh Bagratuni calls the emperor *Mowrik*. We also find this form in Kirakos. It is true that Ammianus Marcellinus mentions a *Mauricius*, an officer in the Roman army, and that a jurist by the name of *Mauricianus* is cited in the *Digest*. Therefore, the origin of the name may be Roman.

P. 135. Leather money. — The Armenian historian Asoghik (III, 16) relates that the Arab prince Ibn Khosroes, the one to whom Bardas Scleros fled, "ordered that the bright silver be mixed with copper and lead; as the merchants refused to accept this money, he had his name inscribed on potsherds or on leather, and gave (these potsherds and pieces of leather) to some to buy food or clothing." [[Asoghik \(III, 16\)](#)] (Antilias, Lebanon, 2010) pp. 765-766, Classical Armenian text at Internet Archive.] We leave this curious text to the historians of Byzantine finance.

---

### Wikipedia:

[Maurice](#), reigned 582-602

[Constantine V](#), reigned 741-775